
REVIEWS

Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi, eds. *Our Sisters' Keepers: Nineteenth-Century Benevolence Literature by American Women*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005. 299p.

BERNADETTE H. HYNER
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Our Sisters' Keepers examines the manner in which 19th-century American women wrote about their role in poverty relief. While they imagined the individual as a dynamic entity oscillating between “selfish and selfless pursuits” (1) these writers re-envisioned and redefined the concept of American identity.

Jill Bergman and Debra Bernardi, the editors of *Our Sisters' Keepers*, understand American benevolence literature as a derivative of the British industrial reform novel. Whereas the latter focuses on factory workers and exposes injustices imbedded in industrial capitalism, the former struggles to reconcile the tensions between American individualism and self-reliance. In an effort to intersect gender and reform with texts on philanthropy, *Our Sisters' Keepers* steers clear of obscuring notions of benevolence within categories such as class, race, or sentimentalism. Instead, the contributors to this study argue that an extension of 19th-century sentimental values linked to notions of womanhood and morality became conflated with femininity. While marked by class, race, gender, and age, American women defined their existence in relationships to each other, and above all in interactions with the needy.

Based on this assumption, *Our Sisters' Keepers* aligns itself with previous studies that read benevolence through the lens of gender and (self-) reform. Already in 1993, Deborah Carlin (“‘What Methods have Brought Blessing’: Discourses of Reform in Philanthropic Literature”) identified a female literary tradition in 19th-century America that prescribes “good will, generosity, and monetary contributions” (204) while it also stresses a woman’s lack of agency linked to her domestic responsibilities. Lisa A. Long published an essay in 2001 (“The Postbellum Reform Writings of Rebecca Harding Davis and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps”) that traced reform as a trope facilitating a woman’s self-transformation.

Building on Carlin’s and Long’s reading of benevolence literature, the analyses in *Our Sisters' Keepers* are divided into two parts. The first brings together texts of benevolence as a genre while the second sorts out the goals and consequences of benevolence.

In part I, Karen Tracy (“Stories of the Poorhouse”) identifies the almshouse as a suitable venue to negotiate the panoptic (objectifying) and the sentimental (empathetic) gaze; then Tracy concludes that while women writers’ increasingly empathetic gaze grew wary of blaming the needy for their lot, they used sentiment to identify with the poor. Their accounts of poverty relief sought to resist and react to the abuses philanthropists witnessed in the poorhouses of 19th-century America.

Following Tracy’s analysis, Lori Merish’s study (“Representing the ‘Deserving Poor’” and “Dedicated to Works of Beneficence”) paired with an analysis of Antebellum women’s panic fiction authored by Mary Templin (“‘Dedicated to Works of Beneficence’: Charity as Model for a Domesticated Economy in Antebellum Women’s Panic Fiction”) offers examples of self-representation and self-empowerment. In the texts read by Merish, a figure representative of the poor documents her own poverty, while Templin studies texts in which women recorded acts of charity that served not only to show off their financial savvy but also to improve on an economic system that accepted benevolence as a way of life.

The final essay in this section (Whitney Womack’s “Reforming Women’s Reform Literature”) reads the benevolence literature of Rebecca Harding Davis against the well-established tradition of the British industrial reform novel and concludes that Davis forces readers to question simplified images of poverty relief common in reform novels.

The first two essays introducing part II of *Our Sisters’ Keepers* (Debra Bernardi’s “‘The Right to Be Let Alone’: Mary Wilkins Freeman and the Right to a ‘Private Share’” and Monika Elbert’s “Women’s Charity vs. Scientific Philanthropy in Sarah Orne Jewett”) read benevolence as a discourse unveiling the tensions between 19th-century notions of individual self-reliance and the relational self. While Jewett’s benevolence literature reconciles this tension by highlighting the gift as a mutually empowering act, Freeman’s work stresses the right of all citizens, including the needy, to live the way they choose.

The next two analyses examine the clash between the compassionate community and individual autonomy. Jill Bergman (“‘Oh, the Poor Women!’: Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s Motherly Benevolence”) exposes Phelps’ juxtaposition of the charitable community and the poor as a conflicted vision of a maternal reformer maintaining control over her needy “children.” In contrast, Terry Novak (“Frances Harper’s Poverty Relief Mission in the African American Community”) reads Harper’s depiction of the charitable black community against the oppressive post-reconstruction years which gave birth to an African-American version of benevolence that unites (rather than divides) philanthropists with their less fortunate sisters.

Finally, the essays authored by Sarah Chinn (“To Reveal the Humble Immigrant Parents to Their Own Children’: Immigrant Women, Their Children, and the Hull-House Museum”) and James Salazar (“Character’s Conduct: The Democratic Habits of Jane Addams’s ‘Charitable Effort’”) exclusively focus on the philanthropy of Jane Addams. Whereas Chinn explores the author’s attempt to establish harmony between ethnic identities, age, and generational selves, Salazar argues that compassion, a cornerstone of 19th- and early 20th-century women’s “character” (255), frequently stands in opposition to quests for autonomy marking humanitarians as possessors of agency in the public sphere.

Our Sisters’ Keepers stands as a seminal study of gendered identity in 19th-century America. Its collection of texts draws on a myriad of sources varying greatly in vision and voice while it rethinks the benevolent self as a “we” that struggles to reconcile the individual “I” with the relational, gendered self. The study skillfully unravels conceptualizations of philanthropy and compels the reader to rethink 19th-century notions of charity in relation to existing hierarchies that shape the interactions between philanthropists and the needy. In addition to scholars researching American history and social reform, students with interests in 19th-century literary depiction of gender, class, and race will find this book informative and insightful. ✨